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# HOW ONE CITY CHURCH SERVES A CHANGED NEIGHBORHOOD

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By

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*Minister of Mt. Vernon Place*

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*Published by*

The Department of Christian Social Relations

The Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America

May 1949

Price: 15 Cents



## FOREWORD

THE Department of Christian Social Relations requested the Rev. John W. Rustin to prepare this pamphlet. There were several reasons back of this request. In the first place, Dr. Rustin has been an active member of the Department for a number of years. In the second place, under Dr. Rustin's leadership, Mt. Vernon Place Methodist Church has achieved an enviable position in the religious life of the nation's capital. It is a downtown church in every sense of that descriptive title. The neighborhood in which Mt. Vernon Place is located is largely commercial, and the residences that remain are largely third-class dwellings.

Instead of improvising remedial measures for the many social problems that beset the neighborhood, Mt. Vernon Place Church has developed a long range program that deals realistically with the basic social causes of the ills in the neighborhood.

This pamphlet tells the story of the development of that program. This is the program of a large metropolitan church. However, the principles established may be applied by any church, large or small.

Obviously, this pamphlet does not present the entire program of Mt. Vernon Place Church. The social welfare program outlined is but a part of its total evangelistic outreach. For example, over the past 10 years an average of more than 400 members have been received. In addition, a yearly average of 100 adults have joined the church on profession of faith.

It is the hope of the Department of Christian Social Relations that this booklet will prove helpful to all who are wrestling with the problems faced by the downtown church and that it will prove an inspiration to those who share a concern for the effectiveness of the churches' ministry in the modern community.

BEVERLEY M. BOYD, *Executive Secretary*  
Department of Christian Social Relations



## HOW ONE CITY CHURCH SERVES A CHANGED NEIGHBORHOOD

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CHURCH authorities generally are agreed that the downtown churches of Protestantism face some very acute problems. It is relatively easy to see why those problems have arisen, considering the rapid growth and expansion of our cities. A few years ago we were predominantly a rural nation—today nearly three-fourths of our people live in cities—that is, they make their homes in cities, but in many instances they have not yet learned to live there. From the comparative simplicity of living in a small community with intimate and friendly neighbors, they have suddenly been thrust into a complex city life, and the result many times is tragic frustration. Surely the church has a responsibility in helping them to make adjustments and in building a program adequate to meet their needs.

### *Why Our Denominations Should Be Deeply Concerned*

When people move to the city, statistics show that in the beginning they nearly always live in the downtown area. They want to be closer to their work—they are unfamiliar with the city and are afraid of the complex transportation system. In a short time most of them will move, but by the time they have moved, their habits are pretty well fixed. My observation is that if a person does not become identified with a local church within six months after coming to the city, he is not likely to do so. Many fine people who are church leaders in small towns or rural communities have been completely lost after moving to the city.

It is the downtown church, therefore, that has not only the opportunity but the responsibility of reaching these people as they pour into our urban centers. This does not mean that the downtown church should continue to hold fast to all its



members. Residential churches should be built and supported and the downtown churches should be constant feeders to them. Certainly any denomination will be the loser that does not have an intelligent understanding of what is taking place in the city life of America, and does not see the necessity for a strong downtown church in helping to meet that need.

What has been happening in these busy urban centers? Many of the churches so situated have become only gentle reminders of bygone days. For years they have been slowly dying. In too many instances they haven't realized it until too late to do anything about it. With the encroachment of commercial interests, the transforming of aristocratic homes into second-rate boarding houses, and the shifting of racial populations, these downtown churches themselves have gradually become rundown institutions in many senses of the word—completely losing their influence and vitality. All this has resulted in the expenditure of vast sums of missionary money in a vain attempt to revive the dying interest by the establishment of an institutional type of program.

My observation has been that this has not been too successful and that a new approach must be made if we are to adequately serve the downtown community. The denomination that is not willing to sit down and take stock of all the churches in its city and realize that the downtown church must be willing to feed its members and even its leaders into the suburban areas, can become selfish, smug and complacent. At the same time if the neighborhood church does not realize that without keeping its downtown churches strong, encouraging many of its leaders to continue to make for a strong program, it will really be "killing the goose that lays the golden egg."

This requires real leadership and vision on the part of our denominational leaders and it is one of the glaring weaknesses of all Protestantism.

### *The Abundant Life*

The downtown church must not merely be a preaching place, although this is highly important, but its program must



be geared both to lead and to challenge the individual into working for the abundant life—the main emphasis of the Christian church.

WHOLESOME RECREATION—How can the church do this? First of all, it should provide wholesome recreation. Too many churches have treated recreation as a means to an end, rather than an end within itself. We put on all kinds of recreational programs, trying to interest our young people in the church.

Time and time again I have been asked by church leaders to explain our recreational program in order that they too might have more young people attending their churches. These leaders, too many times, have in mind recreation as a means to an end—in other words as “molasses to catch flies,” without really recognizing that wholesome recreation in a church is an end in itself.

If this abundant life is to come to our people it cannot come by merely saying to our young people that they must not do this or that. The church must be concerned for the whole recreational needs of that individual. It does not have to build bowling alleys, gymnasiums or even recreational centers to do this, for commercial facilities are not only available but when a church has vision it can make those commercial interests serve the church in a more effective way than the church can ever hope to provide with its own facilities. For instance, what church could build forty bowling alleys—and yet for twelve years now our church has taken over one of the largest bowling alleys in the city, and each Saturday evening all of those alleys are used by Mount Vernon Place Church. The result is that instead of our young people having no place to go on Saturday evening, more than 200 of them spend nearly three hours in wholesome competitive recreation. It does not cost the church anything as the young people are perfectly willing to pay all the expenses involved. In every city there are ideal ball parks, recreational centers, bowling alleys, and swimming pools that can be utilized by our churches if they dare to furnish leadership in a constructive program in directing its people, even its adults, into this field of wholesome recreation. Vision and planning can accomplish wonders.



How easy it has been for the churches to condemn their young people for going to places of amusement that are unwholesome, when all the time they could have avoided all of this by a positive program in attracting them into wholesome recreational activities.

Captain Rhoda J. Milliken, Director, Woman's Bureau Metropolitan Police Department said: "To those of us who must deal with the problems which constantly arise in the mid-city area, it is heartening to find such service as that of Mount Vernon Place extended in the spirit of real neighborliness and understanding of what young people need." Captain Milliken called our Department of Social Welfare during the Christmas holidays and asked if the church would be willing to go ahead with its program of Open House, even though Christmas and New Years came on Saturday. She felt that it would do much to help solve many of the problems that would arise in this downtown section of our city. We have been holding this Open House program about seven years, beginning it during the war years for service men and women and war-workers. We have found that with the closing down of the USO it is meeting a larger need than ever before. Literally, hundreds of young people have been introduced to other wholesome young people through this program. It runs from 8:30 to midnight each Saturday in the social hall of our church and has proved its value many times over.

FINE FELLOWSHIP—In the second place, the church should be a fellowship. Young people just out of college pour into our cities beginning their life work in strange situations, marry, establish homes in small apartments, the baby comes; possibly dies, although they are surrounded by people on every side, there is no one to care about their sorrow or to extend a friendly sympathy. Is the church concerned about this? It should be. Not just to get people to come to its services, but to provide the kind of fellowship in Sunday School classes, young people's programs, circles within the Woman's Society, organizations of all kinds, that should be living cells making every person within its membership know that somebody loves him and is concerned for his welfare.



For instance, the hundred and forty-four young people of our Drama Department who last year painted scenery, built stages, strung electric wires, and did the many jobs necessary in putting on a good play, found stimulating companionship and fun after rather monotonous days in the office. Loneliness was forgotten in creative activity. Life had new meaning. The fact that the five major productions ran two weeks or more each, in a sophisticated city like Washington, and played to packed houses, was happily incidental.

The School of Music too opens doors of interest and activity to those who enjoy singing, playing the piano, or organ, or doing orchestral work. The use of the church pianos for practice can afford much pleasure to those who have no other facilities. Music is fun and draws people together in a closer feeling of oneness with the church and all it stands for. The church that does care, tries to plan for the needs of its members in many and varying activities.

**SOUND INSTRUCTION**—The Church should not be just a place for wholesome recreation, as valuable as that is, or even fine fellowship that can be a means of avoiding many frustrations, but the church should provide sound instruction. How weak most of the teaching in our church has been—not only because of poorly equipped teaching staffs with a few minutes set aside on a Sunday morning, but also because the church has not taken advantage of the many opportunities that are ours in the preparation of courses of study that can meet the intellectual and spiritual needs of every member of its congregation. We have allowed ourselves to get into fixed habits of thought concerning courses in our church schools. Sunday School classes have become little churches as they have attempted, with special music and attractive speakers, to put on another little church service within the church. What golden opportunities are offered to us as church leaders giving our people sound instruction.

To illustrate, several years ago we were limping along, trying to attempt to have Sunday evening programs for our young people and young adults. There was very little interest, especially on the part of that age group we speak of as young



adults—24-35 years of age. A School For Christian Living was planned, with courses on World Peace, Race Relations, Courtship and Marriage, Personality Development, Know Your Bible—courses not only attractively named but with outstanding teachers. The result was that in a short time nearly five hundred were enrolled in these courses, and the young adult department within our church school, which had less than one hundred members eight years ago, now has more than six hundred enrolled. In a downtown church, where it is not always easy to have a great church school, by daring to have longer teaching hours and better trained instruction, we have made a net gain of more than five hundred in the past two years.

This growth has not come because of contests or trying to "whoop it up" through sensational methods of any of the existing classes, but has come because new classes have been organized to meet existing needs.

For example, eight and one-half years ago we invited a group of five or six young married couples to come out to our home to discuss the need for young couples to meet together to discuss their common problems—to study and play together, and to create the kind of home life that would make it easier for them not only to remain happily married but to build the kind of homes in which they and their children would find a natural wholesomeness and a spiritual atmosphere. In this one class today there are about 220 fathers and mothers and in eight and one-half years there has never been a divorce in the active membership.

As a minister I have tried many different kinds of programs for the mid-week service, but when three years ago I began to do just a real teaching job using Goodspeed's *Introduction to The Old Testament* and his *Introduction to The New Testament*, we have averaged more than 175 people present in a mid-week program that runs from September 15 to June 1.

So, every organization in the church should not only provide avenues of fellowship but should be a place for Christian teaching; teaching about the abundant life through a knowledge



that comes from an understanding and interpretation of the Christian way of life.

WORTHWHILE INSPIRATION AND WORSHIP—The downtown church that is really going to reach people must be inspiring. This does not mean that it has to be sensational. In fact, it had better not be, for if it is, public interest being aroused by such a program, will demand a continuation of sensationalism. There is no excuse for the church not to be truly inspiring in all that it does. Neither is there any excuse for the church to encourage such a statement as "dull as a sermon." Why should a sermon be dull? It certainly will not be if it deals with vital issues in the light of the teachings of Jesus. There is something contagious about people who come to a church which inspires them to nobler living. This spirit and enthusiasm are felt in all areas of their lives. The church that provides that kind of inspiration not only through its preaching but in all of its activities will find that it will have more people pouring through its doors than it can possibly accommodate.

Our churches should be open for worship, not only at all hours every day of the week, but with meditation rooms and worship centers always available. This will make it possible for many of the passing throng from off the busy streets to pause long enough to hear the voice of the Eternal speaking to their hearts. Some three years ago I had a very interesting experience. One of my friends of the Kiwanis Club suddenly turned to me one day and said, "Why don't some of you ministers of these downtown churches here in Washington have a place for a man to come off the street into one of your churches and hear a voice saying, 'The Eternal God is Thy refuge and underneath are the Everlasting arms'?" The next day he sent me a check for \$100, saying as he did so, "I never make a suggestion, such as I made the other day, without following through with the practical means to help develop the idea." So, there I was with an idea and a \$100 check, not knowing what to do with either. Six months later, sitting in a restaurant away from home, a young person dropped a nickel in a juke-box and then as the first discordant note struck my ears, the idea came to life. Why not build a beautiful little room for



worship, accessible to the street, with a mechanical juke-box and instead of inserting a nickel, to press a button and to hear Nelson Eddy singing "Rock of Ages, Cleft For Me," "The Twenty-third Psalm" with an organ background, or with the great prayers of the centuries recorded with a message of hope to those who pass by?

The dream has become a reality. The worship center has been built—a young man with a Roman Catholic background built with his own hands the altar, then when he had finished it, joined the church on profession of faith. There is an atmosphere of quietness and beauty in every detail about this idea. The result has been truly astounding. People from other cities, having heard about it, have stopped by to worship. People with acute problems have gone in to find strength and a new direction for living. Just now mahogany pews to match the altar are being built, and fluorescent lights built into the pews will designate the button that can be pushed for the message that will meet the need of the individual who comes to worship.

Last year, every day during the Lenten season our children's chapel was open, with music appropriate for the season being played at noon-time. There was not a day that there were not people in the chapel for prayer and meditation. The Protestant churches of America should wake up to this need, and provide places for people to sit themselves down awhile and to feel the presence of the Eternal.

### *Social Responsibility*

Even if the church has a program of recreation, fine fellowship, sound instruction, worthwhile inspiration and real worship, and does not give its members a sense of social responsibility it has miserably failed. Our downtown churches must minister to the people who live in the downtown areas.

After careful investigation, the following alarming facts came to my attention about our neighborhood. Eighty-three thousand people lived within twelve blocks of our church, in what is called the Central Library Area. Twelve per cent of the city's population lived in three per cent of its physical



area. Once handsome residences were now changed into cheap boarding and rooming houses. Often as many as thirty-eight individuals lived in a house built for five or six people. Such conditions made for broken homes, and bred crime of all sorts. Door-key kids roamed the streets. Social diseases were rampant. One-third of the juvenile delinquency was to be found here, and thirty-six per cent of all the city's crime. Tuberculosis was ravaging the colored section. And reports were showing that one-half of those committed to the mental institutions were coming from this area. This was an ugly picture, one hardly to be thought of in the beautiful city of Washington. Truly it was not only a "City of Lights," but also a "City of Shadows"—as a recent visiting speaker had said. What could be done about it all? With such a mass of staggering needs, where could a beginning be made? This weighed heavily on the minds of the ministers of this troubled section of the Nation's capitol.

Shortly after this I attended a meeting of the Protestant ministers of the city. It was in the early days of the war, and already we were reaping some of the tragedies that walk hand in hand with war-hysteria. An official from the FBI talked very earnestly to the group seeking their help. He said that hardened prostitutes were fairly easy to control, but that the adolescent girls were more responsible for the rapid spreading of social diseases than any group in this country. In many instances the girls were from broken homes, where the mother was trying desperately to hold things together with her slim earnings. In other cases the girls' delinquency was due primarily to parental indifference and neglect. He felt the ministers must share his concern, and wanted to know what they thought could be done about it. What were they willing to do? I came away from the meeting distressed and with a real searching of my own heart as to how we could help solve this serious problem. Soon an incident occurred which gave us an inspiration for immediate action.

Walking into the church one afternoon, I saw a group of teen-age girls coming from one of the side doors of the Educational Building. They were not familiar to me and upon



questioning them, I found they were neither members of our Church School, nor any of the many clubs and activities. I found they had been using one of the Ladies' rooms as a rendezvous, a rendezvous for a much publicized gang of girls, so bold that they had beaten and robbed a sailor in one of the nearby parks. How could such girls be reached? Certainly in no ordinary manner. I talked the matter over with our Director of Religious Education.

Two weeks later he asked me to come with him to one of the downstairs rooms off the social hall, saying, as he did so, "Prepare to be shocked." Glancing through the door, I saw several girls with a professional tap dancer, being taught to dance and apparently enjoying it thoroughly. A start had been made in the solution of our problem. I was delighted, but even as I watched the girls in their innocent fun I could hear in my imagination a conversation which would likely take place in a few hours. It was Mrs. Jones calling the Chairman of the Official Board, saying: "Do you know what Dr. Rustin is doing now? He has a tap-dancing class right in Mt. Vernon Place Church. Don't you think the time has come to write to the Bishop?" Well, I am sure she wrote him, and felt very virtuous about doing so. By the end of six months there were twenty-eight girls in the class. It was indeed a beginning. From that class there came members for Church School groups of various kinds and interests. One of them was junior counselor at our summer camp two years later, and many of them had been led away forever from the sure road they had been traveling towards prostitution and crime. I am quite sure that the Mrs. Jones of Jesus' day was the one who rushed to her friend with the news that she had seen Jesus talking to the Samaritan woman. "I wonder," she continued, "if Jesus knows she is living in adultery?" Yes, He knew, and already had said to her, "If thou knewest the gift of God and who it is that sayeth to thee 'Give me to drink' thou wouldst have asked of Him and He would have given thee living water."

Ever seeking to meet the increasing needs, Mt. Vernon Place Church bought and equipped a Community House. A full-time social worker, and a part-time club worker directs its



activities with the help of a large force of volunteer workers. The Community House is open every day in the week. Hundreds of people pass through its doors day and night, for activities of every kind and description. Sewing and cooking classes and crafts of various kinds are taught to parents as well as children. Reading rooms and game rooms are available. Directed play during idle hours helps keep many would-be delinquents happily and wholesomely occupied. Mothers' Clubs give social interests to otherwise empty lives. The directors are ever alert for ways to meet community problems, and feel that a flexible program is best adapted to expanding needs.

Out of concern for children who had only the hot sidewalks for their summer playgrounds, grew the idea and development of our camping program. Started originally for only children, it has grown in interest and scope of work during the four years it has been in existence, until now it affords much needed outings and vacations for a large group of young people and adults. A well-regulated program scheduled to meet the needs of a four-fold development in life, and give fun, fellowship, and inspiration has proven itself of great value in the life of the church membership as a whole. It has challenged the interest of many to lend a helping hand to this project. In many instances this had led to a deepening interest in the church, and all it stands for in the world today.

It is not easy to put on a program that will reach boys and girls in the under-privileged sections of the city. Property will be destroyed. Freshly painted walls will be soiled. Petty thievery and annoyances of various kinds will be perpetrated.

The problem of drink plays a major part in the difficulties we encounter. So often a drunken father or mother is responsible for the misbehavior of the children. Help has come through the organization of Alcoholics Anonymous. There are four squads in our church and they are doing a fine work. In many cases the alcoholic has been saved through their interest and work; the family brought together again and rehabilitated. Often they move out into better sections of the city. We rejoice in their improved circumstances, and turn again to the long, slow process of trying to minister to the needs of a new family.



Some few years ago a very fine member of my church asked me this question: "John, what are we going to do with all these poor people who are coming into our church? We are already crowded beyond the limits of comfort. If they crowd out our wealthier members, how will we raise our budget?" At that time our budget was only about \$35,000, and we were having difficulty raising it. After giving the matter some thought we decided the answer was to have two morning services, as well as the evening service. That was seven years ago, and ever since then we have had identical services every Sunday morning. Our church is healthier because of its varied members. The challenge of the expanding service program has been a stimulus to the spiritual life of the church. My friend's worries were groundless. Our budget, instead of being \$35,000 this year, was \$114,000. In our campaign to pledge the 1949 budget, we found it was oversubscribed by more than \$6,000.

Realizing the importance of united effort, thirty-five ministers of the Central Library Area have recently organized into a Downtown Council. Together the major problems of housing, playgrounds, and racial difficulties will be considered. Much needed legislation will be recommended. Certainly a stronger, more constructive program can be given to the whole community through this cooperative approach.

It is gratifying to those of us who have had some small part in this kind of program, to know that the leaders of the country are not unaware of our attempt to help solve some of their most acute problems. For instance, J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, has said, "The Mount Vernon Place Church program indicates a realistic approach and a great interest in the boys and girls of the community. This program should be an inspiration to all churches and organizations throughout the country to initiate similar community activities."

The downtown church that dares to minister to its community will find enthusiastic cooperation from many of its members. Even though they move out into other sections of the city, they feel it is worth every sacrifice they make to continue



to support a church which is literally trying to keep the people from "going to hell."

The city church is truly a spot "Where cross the crowded ways of life." It is one of the most strategic missionary centers of our whole church program. Much has been accomplished but so much more needs to be done. The enormity of the task is sometimes almost overwhelming. May we catch a fresh vision of these needs, and in the stirring challenge that they offer, go forth to work with new zeal and eagerness. In bringing light to these dark spots, perhaps we are bringing new vigor to our own America.

"O Master, from the mountain side  
Make haste to heal these hearts of pain;  
Among these restless throngs abide,  
O tread the city's streets again."